

In our Scripture reading today, Jesus charged the disciples with a new commandment. To charge people with something means to impose a task or responsibility on them. It means to exhort with authority. We most often hear a charge at a very important moment in time.

In a wedding ceremony, for example, there’s often a charge to the couple. After the exchange of vows and the first kiss as a married couple, the charge comes to love and care for one another for the rest of their lives. When a pastor and a congregation cement their relationship with a service of installation, there is often a charge to the congregation and a charge to the pastor to be faithful in that relationship.

I believe this is an important moment in the life of First Parish Church. We received new members this morning. That’s huge! Every member brings something new and different to the community. I would say that as we enter into these new relationships, this is a perfect moment for a charge to the congregation.

And I can’t think of a better charge than that which came from Jesus himself. The context of today’s Gospel reading was a very important moment for Jesus and the disciples. Jesus was their leader. He was the glue that held the group together. However, he knew the time had come for him to depart from this world.

Jesus and his followers were gathered together on the night before he died. In the coming days, the disciple’s world will be turned upside down. They would find themselves without their leader. So, Jesus gave them a last instruction. He charged them with an important task. He said, “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another.” Today, I’m suggesting we take that as our charge.

Now, some of you may be thinking we’re getting off easy. That’s not a particularly challenging charge. You might be thinking, “I love everybody. I even have love for strangers and people with different political views than my own. I have no ill will towards anyone. I’m a people person. I just love people.” Love one another. “I can check that box.”

But Jesus continued. He said, “Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.” Suddenly, it’s not so simple. There’s a small, two-letter word in that sentence

that has enormous implications: as. “**AS** I have love you, you also should love one another.” Jesus didn’t tell his followers to love one another in some general way. He said, “Love one another AS I have loved you.”

I love chocolate cake. You can’t beat chocolate cake with vanilla buttercream frosting. I love taking long walks on the beach. I love to feel the sand under my feet and smell the salt air and feel the wind on my face. I love puppies. I love how excited they get when you get down on the floor and play with them. I love the poetry of Maya Angelou. I love the music of the Beatles.

We all love in a general sense. But Jesus charged his followers with a specific kind of love. He wanted them to love as he loved. In fact, just prior to today’s reading, he decided to demonstrate his love for his disciples in a way they found both surprising and troubling.

Jesus and his disciples were gathered together one evening. During supper, he got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciple’s feet and to wipe them with the towel.

Put yourself in the place of the disciples, for a moment. They had a very specific relationship to Jesus. He was the teacher; they were the students. He was the Rabbi; they were the disciples. The student is supposed to sit at the feet of the master. By washing their feet, Jesus reversed the order of things.

Jesus demonstrated his love for his disciples by ignoring his privileged place in the group and by taking on the role of a servant. In other words, he demonstrated his love for his followers by serving them, by caring for their needs, and by acting on their behalf.

We see this continually in the ministry of Jesus. He demonstrated love for people regardless of the consequences. For example, he ignored cultural norms in the ways he loved and respected women. When he went to the home of Mary and Martha, he did something highly unusual for the time. The scandal was not that Martha busied herself in the kitchen. The scandal was that Mary positioned herself at the feet of Jesus.

In those days, only men could be disciples. It was forbidden for a woman to sit at the feet of a Rabbi. Mary broke with the cultural expectations and Jesus affirmed it! He repeatedly demonstrated his love and respect for women by refusing to treat them as second-class citizens.

Jesus got into trouble for eating with sinners and tax collectors. There were certain people in society with whom one was not supposed to associate, but the love of Jesus knew no boundaries. He was willing to risk the judgment of others in order to associate with those society shunned.

In those days, blood and other bodily fluids were to be avoided. Therefore, sick and injured people were often considered impure. However, the love of Jesus transcended the purity laws of the time. He didn't avoid people the religious leaders labeled unclean. Because he loved them, he laid hands on them and cured them of their illnesses.

I would suggest to you that what defined Jesus was not that he was successful in his work. It wasn't the fact that he could walk on water. The defining mark of his life was the love he demonstrated. It was acting on behalf of the poor, the sick, and the excluded that got him in trouble and led to his death. In the words of Anthony Padovano, "We were saved not by the physical death of Jesus, but by the absoluteness of a love which did not count death too high a price."

When I was in elementary school, we used to do something called "show and tell." You all know what that is. We'd bring in an object to show the class. Then you'd talk about it. What is it? Where did it come from? What does it mean to you? And you had to do both. It's not the same if you only do one or the other.

I think that's a good image for how Jesus wants us to love one another and love all people. We can feel certain things about others. We can think about how we love another person. We might even bring ourselves to tell certain people we love them. But to love as Jesus loved requires demonstration, it requires acting on behalf of the other.

I don't know what it's like in your family. In some families, it's common for members to tell one another they love them, even if they're not so good at demonstrating that love. They say it, but they don't show it.

In other families, nobody ever says "I love you," but they support one another 100% and they're always there for one another. Sometimes people need to hear us say the words: "I love you!" It's "show AND tell."

Today, the charge to the congregation is to love the way Jesus loved. It's to put love into action by serving others and acting on their behalf. The good news is that we're doing this kind of thing, at First Parish, all the time.

I go to a lot of meetings here at the church, so I see things that most of you don't see. There are lots of people putting in enormous amounts of time and effort, on our behalf, to maintain our programs, our worship, and our physical campus. I see all those efforts as ways we demonstrate love for one another.

We say we care about people in need and we show it by holding food drives, winter coat collections, and pumpkin patches to support the Navaho.

We say we care about God's creation and we show it by offering composting, recycling, and establishing a pollinator garden.

I believe that when you became an Open and Affirming congregation, you demonstrated the kind of love Jesus demonstrated. You didn't just say all people are welcome here; you took action.

Jesus said, "By this everyone will know you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." So welcome...Duncan, Jennifer, Betsy, Sherry, Diane and Jim. Jesus is defined by his love, and with your help, so will we.